

City cyclist's legacy picks up speed

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WORCESTER- Benton E. Sayer, a fourth-grader at West Tatnuck School, knows a bit about Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, Worcester's world champion bicycle racer.

"When the race starts, he is at the end; but when it gets close to the finishing line, he speeds up and wins. He is a sprinter."

That characteristic of Mr. Taylor's racing tactic appears to be influencing his legacy, which after decades of obscurity, is beginning to speed into view, with more and more people throughout the country taking notice and celebrating Mr. Taylor's dominance of the cycling world more than 100 years ago.

Mr. Taylor, an African American, was born in Indiana and raised by a wealthy white family, who gave him a bicycle when he was young. He quickly became an expert rider, and by the time he moved to Worcester in the fall of 1895, he was making a name for himself.

He became known as the "Worcester Whirlwind," setting a one-mile world record in 1898 and winning the one-mile world championship in Montreal the next year.

He was the American sprint champion in 1900.

The resurgence of interest in Mr. Taylor was evident yesterday when Benton and 67 of his schoolmates gathered in the Saxe Room at the Worcester Public Library, 3 Salem Square, for a book signing and presentation by the writer and illustrator of a children's book on the bicyclist's life, titled "Major Taylor, Champion Cyclist."

Yesterday's event was part of a fund-raiser organized by the Major Taylor Association and included three sessions, 1:30, 3:30 and 7 p.m.

The book, which was released in January, is already into a second printing.

It wasn't until yesterday, however, that the writer, Lesa Cline-Ransome, and her husband and illustrator, James Ransome, really got the authoritative critical review of the book.

"It was accurate," Elizabeth M. Pellegrini, a fourth-grader, said of the Ransomes' book.

"The illustrations were awesome," third-grader Cameron E. Blondin said.

The pupils should know.



A book signing for "Major Taylor, Champion Cyclist" was the focus of a visit to the Worcester Public Library by Jan Brown-Clarke, far right, Major Taylor's great-granddaughter. James Ransome, illustrator, and his wife, author Lesa Cline-Ransome, signed copies of their book. (T&G Staff /MARK C. IDE)

For the past few years, they have been using a Major Taylor curriculum as part of their Black History Celebration reading assignments.

The curriculum, created by Virginia Walsh, a third-grade teacher at West Tatnuck, is being used by other Worcester public schools and by schools throughout the country.

In addition, the West Tatnuck pupils have been major players in a local fund-raising effort to build a monument to Mr. Taylor.

Using the February vacation week to get family and friends to make pledges, the pupils conduct an annual readathon, which has raised more than \$1,000 in each of the past three years.

Lynne Tolman, spokeswoman for the Major Taylor Association, which is running the fund drive for the Major Taylor memorial, said the monument is to be placed at the south entrance of Worcester Public Library.

Of course, the fund-raiser, which kicked off about five years ago, has the characteristic Major Taylor slow start.

The monument will cost \$250,000, of which about \$51,000 in donations and pledges have been raised, according to Ms. Tolman, who said she is looking for more donations and hoping for a fast finish.

The George Street Bike Challenge for Major Taylor is scheduled for 10 a.m. July 25 at Main and George streets. The Challenge will test how fast cyclists can pedal up one of Worcester's steepest hills. The challenge will be held where Major Taylor used to train and is a good place to start getting into the action, Ms. Tolman said.

Those looking for a competitive edge can check out the Bicycle Hill Climbing Clinic on July 8 and 22, at which participants will learn and practice bicycle handling, shifting and climbing skills in preparation for the George Street Bike Challenge.

For more information on the fund drive and the life of Major Taylor, visit the association's Web site at majortaylorassociation.com.